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ABSTRACT

Citizen engagement is important for preserving a prosperous democracy and keeping elected officials accountable to their constituents. New issues affecting rural citizens are causing communities to reframe and ask new planning questions. Two approaches to citizen engagement are asset mapping, in which communities focus on their strengths and resources instead of problems and deficiencies, and systems thinking, which considers how the interdependence of issues affects whole systems. Barriers to citizen involvement include a lack of trust in others, a lack of time, subtle racial and economic barriers, feelings that citizen input is not welcome or considered, and community leaders who believe that citizens don't understand community issues and complicate the decision-making process. Institutions that nurture rural civic engagement are the cooperative extension services and leadership programs sponsored by local chambers of commerce and other organizations. Recommendations for increasing citizen engagement include clarifying Cooperative Extension Service policy about the nature of leadership and civic engagement work and its significance in the broader mission of building citizen capacity; expanding diversity, not just in numbers or parity of participation by race or gender, but organizationally and ideologically; directing more leadership development efforts in the rural South toward those with limited incomes and diverse racial, ethnic, and ideological backgrounds; developing and strengthening urban-rural relationships; and continuing the role of academic institutions in building citizen engagement. (Contains 12 references.) (TD)

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THE RURAL SOUTH: Preparing for the Challenges of the Millennium

Sponsored by the Southern Rural Development Center, the Farm Foundation, the TVA Rural Studies Program at the University of Kentucky, the USDA Economic Research Service, and the 29 Southern land-grant institutions.

Strengthening civic engagement in community decision-making

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Introduction

Citizen engagement is tied to the classical American concepts of a free and prosperous society. Some argue that without engaged citizens a democracy will become eroded and that communities will suffer when they are governed by only a few individuals. Even the most gifted and knowledgeable leaders cannot "do it alone." Citizen engagement is crucial for helping community leaders identify issues and make good decisions.

This policy brief focuses on three major issues. First is to explore how the questions that drive civic engagement in community decision-making are changing and to suggest two approaches that can be responsive to these new questions. Second, this policy brief highlights barriers that discourage citizen engagement. Third, the brief presents policy recommendations for rural institutions that support civic engagement in community decision-making.

The Challenge for Relevant Questions

As the economy and environment changes in the South, there are questions that are more likely to engage citizens. Southern communities are beginning to raise new questions. For example, the question of "How can we attract industry?" isn't working for many Southern communities. Some already have made significant concessions to manufacturing firms that have subsequently moved to areas south of the United States where labor costs are cheaper. There is increased interest in looking at a range of opportunities besides conventional industrial recruitment, such as fostering local entrepreneurship and finding ways to plug local assets into the global economy. Many communities face environmental and development conflicts. Hence, there is increased interest in questions such as, "How can we sustain our economy, as well as our natural assets?"

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People become engaged in public life when an issue they care about is at stake. Studies indicate that people aren't apathetic about their communities, but they often feel left out of the decision-making process by elected officials or other community leaders [a]. They do not want to merely follow somebody or something, but instead want to be involved in determining the future. The public does not want to engage in questions that have obvious answers. People become engaged with questions that have an impact on their concerns — questions that do not lead to self-doubt, but stimulate discussion and build competency.

"Studies indicate that people aren't apathetic about their communities, but they often feel left out of the decision-making process by elected officials or other community leaders."

Citizens who live in communities that place a high value on traditions are interested in questions such as, "How can we preserve our values, such as neighborliness and our spiritual roots, while we grow economically?" Other questions deal with newcomers, such as the growing Hispanic population, or nagging concerns about class and race divisiveness such as, "How can we strengthen relationships between ethnic groups, races, classes and age groups in order to build a stronger community?" These questions are especially relevant in areas where these divisions have led to hatred or violence. Others are drawn to quality-of-life questions such as, "How can we improve the quality or availability of housing for the elderly, the poor, young families or newcomers?"

The decline of the tobacco and textile sectors is having a significant impact on many rural communities in the South, and people are drawn to the issue of building a rural economy that is sustainable. There is increased interest in land use for several reasons. Some want planning to control or limit growth that will change the rural character and charm. Many rural citizens are interested in questions about forestry and large-scale poultry, swine or beef operations. These industries can contribute to the local economy, but they also raise concerns about how they will impact the local environment and rural communities.

Two New Approaches to Engage Citizens

Asset mapping — Less focus on problems, more on assets

New ways of framing questions demand new levels of citizen involvement in community decision-making. Increasingly, focus is shifting from problems or deficits in communities because research indicates that these issues tend to depress or overwhelm citizens, especially those living in economically depressed communities. Citizens are drawn to questions that emphasize strengths such as, "What are your individual assets, the assets of your informal associations, and the assets of formal organizations in the community? How can these assets be developed to improve quality of life in a community?" This approach is often called "asset mapping," and it has successfully engaged citizens in even the most economically depressed communities and neighborhoods [4].

Citizens are also drawn to questions about the intended future such as, "What do we want our community to look like 10 or 20 years from now?" Some questions about the future focus on special areas. For example, as the knowledge economy requires more skilled workers, there is increased concern about the shared vision for local schools in

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communities that want to stay competitive in a global environment. As traditional industries decline in the South, many rural citizens are drawn to the question of how to build a sustainable rural economy in the years ahead. Needless to say, there isn't a perfect question that is likely to engage citizens, but we need to find out what concerns citizens from various economic and educational backgrounds. Based on citizen concerns, questions can be developed to encourage genuine dialogue and shared problem-solving. For example, the Southern Consortium of University Public Service Organizations (SCUPSO) is developing tool kits to help build citizen capacities for visioning, infrastructure planning, land use planning, land conservation and fiscal impact analysis. This Smart Growth project is aimed at small town growth in the South [b].

Systems Thinking — More focus on interrelatedness of issues

In the past, citizens and their leaders had a tendency to focus on one aspect of a particular problem or issue. This piecemeal approach fragments our knowledge base and ignores how the problem relates to a broader system or structure. It can pit groups against one another, such as environmentalists against economic development advocates or farmers against townspeople. Systems thinking, on the other hand, is a body of knowledge and tools that has developed over the past 50 years to look at the interrelatedness of issues. Systems thinking helps people understand how interdependencies in a system work. In this new "science," there isn't one answer to a question but a variety of potential actions [4]. Each of these actions produces

The Issues

- Citizen engagement is important for preserving a prosperous democracy and keeping elected officials accountable to their constituents.
- New issues affecting rural citizens are causing communities to reframe and ask new planning questions.

Two Approaches to Engage Citizens

- Asset mapping: Communities are focusing on their strengths and local resources to help plan for the future. This approach has been successful in engaging citizens in even the most economically depressed communities and neighborhoods.
- Systems thinking: In order to plan effectively, community members must understand the interrelatedness of issues and see how interdependencies in a system work. In this new way of thinking, there isn't one answer to a question, but a variety of potential actions.

Barriers Toward Citizen Involvement

- A lack of trust in others may prevent some citizens from participating in community decision-making.
- A lack of time may be a factor in low levels of community engagement.
- Subtle racial and economic barriers still discourage community engagement.
- Feelings that their input does not matter or will not be considered, or that they are not welcome, discourage some citizens from community engagement.
- Some community leaders believe that citizens complicate the decision-making process or that they do not understand community issues.

Institutions Nurturing Rural Civic Engagement

- The Cooperative Extension Services at land-grant institutions have a broad mission to develop the capacities of citizens to help themselves.
- Leadership programs have been sponsored by local Chambers of Commerce and other organizations to help citizens in rural communities come together to address local issues.

Summary and Policy Recommendations

- The Cooperative Extension Service should emphasize a clearer policy outlining the nature of leadership and civic engagement work in Extension and its significance in the broader mission of building citizen capacity.
- The Cooperative Extension Service should find new ways to expand diversity — not just in numbers or parity of participation by race or gender — but in meaningful involvement both organizationally and in fieldwork.
- Leadership programs in the rural South should direct more of their efforts to those with limited incomes and diverse racial, ethnic and ideological backgrounds.
- Urban-rural relationships should be developed and strengthened.
- Academic institutions should continue to play an important role in building citizen engagement.

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results and often other consequences somewhere else in the system. Many organizations are integrating systems thinking into their structures. For example, cancer institutions are integrating their mission with other health organizations and local economic development efforts. Industrial development groups are expanding their mission to include community arts, health, education and recreation. In a community setting, systems thinking means that a more representative group of citizens should be involved in developing agendas, identifying choices and making decisions. Without this kind of representation and involvement, a decision may impact negatively on other aspects of the system.

The Mississippi State University Extension Service is one of many institutions in the region that has attempted to integrate systems thinking into educational efforts with working concepts of "total living communities" and "total sustainable economies." For example, their work with youth and families is integrated with economic development, water systems and other aspects of community life. In Kentucky, health care advocates and farming organizations concerned about the well-being of tobacco farmers and rural communities participated in a sustained dialogue about tobacco-related health issues and farm diversification [c]. They reached a common ground to protect the economic concerns of tobacco farmers and address health issues — especially teen smoking. The Mississippi and Kentucky approaches reflect the move toward systems thinking.

"Those concerned with civic engagement should be aware of the trust issue, and they should find ways to incorporate trust and other values into civic engagement."

Barriers Toward Citizen Involvement

Are Citizens Less Engaged?

Researchers have debated whether citizen involvement is stable or declining. In 1995, Robert Putnam argued membership was declining in groups such as bowling leagues and the PTA [9]. He believed people were less linked to each other and this would cause a diminishment of community and democracy. Putnam cited the declining rates of citizens joining voluntary organizations, their lack of trust in one another and a general abatement in voting as evidence for his argument. Other scholars have argued that the data doesn't show a decline in civic engagement [5]. Paxson found there was not a general decline in trust of institutions and no decline in voluntary associations [7]. However, she did find a consistent decline in trust of others. She asked whether people trusted the abstract "others," not specific individuals such as one's neighbors or friends. This general decline in trust for others can be reflected in gated communities and a sense of "us" versus "them." It can lead to an erosion of democracy on a broader level. Those concerned with civic engagement should be aware of the trust issue, and they should find ways to incorporate trust and other values into civic engagement.

Others suggest many American families are just time-deprived and have become disengaged from their communities because of their nomadic lifestyles. They don't have enough time to meet work and family demands, much less be sociable with their neighbors. With more women employed outside the home, an increase of multi-job wage

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Four ways to encourage diversity in civic groups

- Give oral and written invitations to citizens who are not involved with community decision-making.
- Consider the ideas of newcomers when they are offered.
- Meet in socially comfortable places, and strive for a welcoming atmosphere.
- Groom a diverse leadership base.

earners, and longer commuting distances to work, many citizens are making practical choices about how to spend their time in civic activities.

The Barriers of Color and Economic Status Still Matter

Many planners and developers claim subtle racial and economic barriers in mainstream organizations discourage civic involvement in the South and in other parts of the nation. The political process is understood differently by blacks and whites, and perspectives vary based on gender, age and social class [2]. Some don't feel welcome or that their input really matters.

Those heading mainstream groups must make a concerted effort if they truly want diverse citizen engagement. Blanket invitations or newspaper announcements are insufficient when used alone. There are four major ways to encourage diversity in civic groups and organizations. First, personally invite those who have not been involved. Oral and written invitations are essential to make one feel welcome. Second, make sure newcomers' ideas will be considered in decision-making. Many people are discouraged when they attend meetings where leaders make decisions prior to hearing their input. Third, find meeting places that are socially comfortable for everyone, especially those who have been uninvolved or excluded in the past. Fourth, work to groom a diverse leadership base. Institutions that nurture citizen engagement in the South also need bold and imaginative plans to counteract the barriers of color and economic status that divide citizens from each other and prevent interaction. For example, the Appalachian Civic Leadership Program used Study Circle materials to discuss race relations in Pulaski County, Kentucky. This helped expand contact with minorities and present opportunities for people to become involved with advisory boards and community programs. It helped minority citizens see that agencies wanted to address issues pertinent to them. It created a better understanding of how to encourage participation by forgotten or excluded citizens [a].

Local Leaders Erect Barriers Toward Shared Power

Some community leaders believe that because they were elected by citizens, they have full responsibility for making decisions and taking the blame or credit for those decisions. Some of these leaders view citizens as a complicating factor in the decision-making process. Such leaders believe minimum citizen input is more efficient and that citizens don't fully understand the community issues. But there are several reasons why such a perspective may be short-sighted. First, if a democracy is going to thrive, it rests on citizen involvement, without which democratic ideals will erode. Second, some elected officials have

"Those heading mainstream groups must make a concerted effort if they truly want diverse citizen engagement."

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drawn lessons from more progressive firms that involve workers as problem-solvers and visionary thinkers. More people involved in problem-solving and analysis can lead to added creativity, more insights and better decisions. As elected officials incorporate systems thinking into their communities, it is imperative that diverse perspectives are represented. Third, citizen involvement can lead to greater ownership of local issues and problems with a more realistic understanding of the limitations often placed upon those in power positions. In recent years, some elected officials have worked hard to include more citizen input. That is, they made it easier for citizens to become involved. They clarified the tasks at hand and provided an atmosphere for creativity, inclusiveness and efficiency. In turn, citizens had the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of issues and felt more committed to their communities.

For example, Stella Roland, a Pulaski County (Kentucky) Extension volunteer, brought together elected officials and citizens in a neighborhood to discuss joint concerns. Initially, the elected officials felt intimidated and concerned that the meeting would be a gripe session aimed at them. They met in homes and volunteer firehouses, natural settings for dialogue. These venues reduced tensions and gave both the elected officials and citizens ownership of the problems and solutions [3].

"County Extension agents also invest significant amounts of time nurturing citizen engagement through their work with the environment and with agricultural and economic development."

Institutions Nurturing Rural Civic Engagement

In recent years, two major kinds of institutions have nurtured civic engagement in the rural South. They include the Cooperative Extension Service at land-grant institutions and many leadership programs that have been established in the region.

The Cooperative Extension Service

The university-based Cooperative Extension Services differ from state to state. They are often stereotyped as institutions that offer agriculture-focused technical assistance. But Extension's founding mission is much broader — to develop the local capacities of citizens to help themselves. Increasingly, some Cooperative Extension Services are "citizen-focused" [1].

For example, according to 1998 data from Kentucky, more than 31 percent of county Extension agents' time is devoted to community capacity building and leadership development. County Extension agents also invest significant amounts of time nurturing citizen engagement through their work with the environment and with agricultural and economic development. While field (county agent) staff involvement in citizenship building has increased significantly in recent years, the land-grant universities have not hired more campus-based specialists to assist with community capacity building. Extension administrators rated the capacity of their institutions to address Communities in Economic Transition as relatively low [12]. This may reflect inadequate resources at the state level to support field staff in this growing area, or it could mean that current staff need to focus more on a "train the trainer" approach and spend less time in the field. Some believe there is a balkanization of Extension's initiatives [5,6].

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For example, youth-focused and community development staff may enhance citizen engagement through separate programming, so they may not necessarily know what each other is doing or rarely cooperate with each other.

While some land-grant institutions have continued to focus their resources on production agriculture at the state level, Mississippi State University's Extension Service has responded assertively to changes in the economy and citizen expectations. It hired one of the region's first full-time community development agents and has significantly expanded its Extension staff at the campus level to meet the need for an engaged citizenry. It has attempted to integrate systems thinking into its structure to eliminate and prevent sharp divisions within the system. The Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service and other university institutions in the South have developed Public Policy Institutes. These institutes bring together elected officials and citizens to learn more about choices for solving public problems rather than taking sides. Participants learn how one's values and background influence their perspective of problems and public policy solutions. Elected officials learn how citizen engagement can make their jobs easier and more productive. Citizens empathize with elected officials who struggle to make decisions that can address community needs.

Leadership Programs

Leadership programs also can promote more effective citizen engagement. The Chambers of Commerce and other organizations such as the Cooperative Extension Service have sponsored leadership programs throughout the rural South. These programs have nurtured the capacity of many rural citizens to become more successfully engaged because they teach new skills, encourage ideas and strengthen networking abilities. Many of these leadership programs also require people to practice their leadership skills and reflect on what they have learned.

Although these leadership programs are valuable, there is room for significant improvement. A Kentucky Long-Term Policy Research Center study on "Civil Society in Kentucky" found most leadership program participants have a higher income than the state average [10]. They do not reflect the racial, income and ideological diversity of the citizenry at large. Many of these programs are interesting and fun, but they lack clear educational goals or a well-developed curriculum to help citizens develop as leaders and become more engaged in their communities. Few programs emphasize skills dealing with change, diversity and conflict. Some offer culturally rich activities with little time for shared reflection on the meaning of the activities. In essence, there needs to be a venue for leadership program directors across the rural South to help them review their programs and plan more effectively. There should be more reflection about how these leadership programs influence citizen involvement.

Several leadership programs serving citizens in the rural South may represent the cutting-edge. They emphasize diversity as well as clear-cut goals and a curriculum for citizen capacity building and engagement. Community Voices, a program based at North Carolina A & T State

"Many of these programs are interesting and fun, but they lack clear educational goals or a well-developed curriculum to help citizens develop as leaders and become more engaged in their communities."

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University, works with "grass-roots" citizens with heavy recruitment from limited-income citizens, minorities and women. The Natural Resources Leadership Institute in Kentucky, North Carolina and Florida brings together individuals that represent developers, environmental advocates, regulatory officials and others concerned about the environment for workshops and other shared experiences. They study natural resource issues from each other's perspectives and learn public conflict resolution and facilitation skills. A critical mass of individuals who can work through their differences and reach a potential common ground is developing in the states that host these institutes. Another new trend emerging in leadership development is the link of urban and rural activists with each other. The Heartland Center for Leadership Development is creating some opportunities for inner-city activists to meet and learn with rural community activists. This interaction is leading to strengthened rural-urban connections that could lead to a greater sensitivity about diversity, as well as new skills and ideas for a more engaged citizenry [d].

"The Cooperative Extension Services at the land-grant institutions and the many local and regional leadership programs sponsored by the Chambers of Commerce and other organizations are nurturing civic engagement in the rural South."

Summary and Policy Recommendations

Some people measure civic engagement by voting participation in elections, but it really involves much more. Voting is not an accurate measure of civic engagement; in fact, it may be considered a passive act of civic engagement. The Cooperative Extension Services at the land-grant institutions and the many local and regional leadership programs sponsored by the Chambers of Commerce and other organizations are nurturing civic engagement in the rural South. Yet, more needs to be done to encourage a representative leadership base for strengthening civic engagement.

The following recommendations are important, especially for the Cooperative Extension Service:

- *The Cooperative Extension Service should emphasize a clearer policy outlining the nature of leadership and civic engagement work in Extension and its significance in the broader mission of building citizen capacity.* While each program area (i.e., 4-H, Agriculture, and Family and Consumer Sciences) within the Cooperative Extension Service offers leadership development programs, more work needs to be done to encourage linkages and dialogues between these areas. Extension's programs not only influence leadership development at the local level, but also have long-term ramifications for the future support of the Cooperative Extension Service itself. Extension still tends to be driven by an expert model. It hasn't developed a cohesive approach for nurturing citizen involvement, even in planning its own programs.

  The Cooperative Extension Service should find new ways to expand diversity – not just in numbers or parity of participation by race or gender – but in meaningful involvement both organizationally and in fieldwork. Diversity of participation needs to extend beyond race and gender. It is also about ideology and values. It's about involving new stakeholders. Extension needs to reach out to environmental and health groups, nonprofit organizations and

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other nontraditional people and groups for building new partnerships. Nontraditional groups have nontraditional ideas and increase the pool of talent, resources and perspectives.

- *Leadership programs in the rural South should direct more of their efforts to those with limited incomes and diverse racial, ethnic and ideological backgrounds.* This doesn't mean leadership programs need to neglect their involvement with traditional leaders. They can work well if they can link traditional leaders with nontraditional leaders in a safe setting and a context for solving community problems together. More time should be allotted for shared reflection about leadership experiences.
- *Urban-rural relationships should be developed and strengthened.* More emphasis in policy development is focused on suburban America. The rural and urban areas are being left aside. People in rural areas want to maintain their sense of community and economic viability. Urban communities have similar needs and issues. Building urban-rural relationships and linkages strengthens access to resources and the potential of mutual assistance for community well-being.
- *Institutions should continue to play an important role in building citizen engagement.* In many leadership efforts, institutions like the land-grant universities or governmental bodies have played a supporting role in strengthening civic engagement in community decision-making. Many community-based leadership initiatives use university resources for training, facilities and expertise. Extension staff play an important role as conveners for networks of people and integrators of resources for community work. This focus shifts the emphasis from individual leadership development skills to shared community leadership. There needs to be more intellectual questioning about these programs and their role in promoting citizen engagement.

"Building urban-rural relationships and linkages strengthens access to resources and the potential of mutual assistance for community well-being."

Conclusion

The Cooperative Extension Services at the land-grant universities can continue to be an effective mechanism for civic development, especially for rural citizens. The Cooperative Extension Service can use its leadership as a flagship institution to be a catalyst for fostering opportunities for citizen involvement in community decision-making.

Endnotes

[a] For more information about the race relations study material, contact Study Circles Resource Center, P.O. Box 203, Rt. 169, Pomfret, CT 06258; Phone: 203-928-2616.
[b] Southern Consortium of University Public Service Organization training materials on Smart Growth can be obtained through the Southern Growth Policies Board, P.O. Box 12293, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709; Phone: 919-941-5145; Website: <www.southern.org/scupso.html>
[c] Kentucky Forum for Health and Agriculture Development (KHAD). For more information, contact Amy Barkley, Tobacco-Free Kids, <amybarkley@tobaccofreekids.org>
[d] Urban-Rural Connections, contact Heartland Center for Leadership Development, 941 'O' Street, Suite 920, Lincoln, NE 68508; Phone: 402-474-7667.

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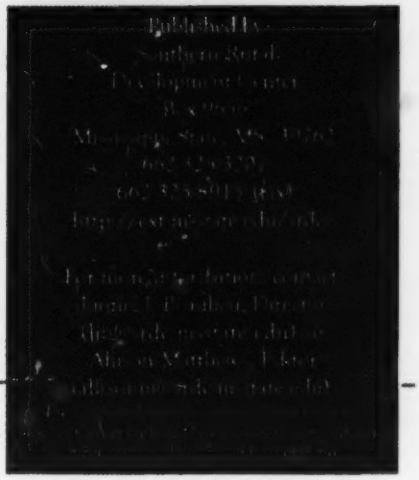

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